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WATER POLLUTION:

EPA halts all mine cleanup work in spill's wake

Jennifer Yachnin, E&E reporter

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U.S. EPA will halt its investigation work at all mines and tailing facilities nationwide in the wake of an accident that ejected more than 3 million gallons of wastewater into Colorado and New Mexico river systems, Administrator Gina McCarthy said yesterday.

During a visit to Durango, Colo., near the Animas River, which turned yellow last week following an ejection of water from the Gold King Mine, McCarthy said EPA is evaluating the accident, including an internal investigation and an independent review by another federal agency or an outside group.

"We will learn lessons from this," said McCarthy, adding that EPA "takes full responsibility. ... No agency could be more upset."

Lawmakers, including Colorado Sen. Cory Gardner (R) and House Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah), have also vowed to conduct extensive oversight into EPA's response and cleanup efforts (*E&ENews PM*, Aug. 12).

McCarthy said the agency has suspended work at other mine cleanup sites to reduce the potential for similar spills.

"We will hold ourselves to a higher standard than anyone else," McCarthy said. In a statement released yesterday, McCarthy clarified that work may continue at some sites if "there is imminent risk in a specific case."

"While we stand down on existing field investigations and assessments at these mining sites, we also are instructing our regions to identify existing sites with similarities to the Gold King Mine site and to identify any immediate threats and consider appropriate response actions," McCarthy said in the statement.

She also noted that new data from tests conducted Friday through Sunday show that contaminant levels in La Plata County, which includes Durango, have returned to levels recorded before the spill.

"This is very good news," McCarthy said, adding that the Animas River "seems to be restoring itself."

Water flows have been increased from the Navajo Dam to assist with dilution as the plume continues downstream to Lake Powell, a reservoir on the boundaries of Arizona and Utah, McCarthy said.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert (R) announced a state of emergency yesterday to respond to the spill,

directing all state agencies to assist communities affected by the tainted water, which contains arsenic, cadmium, lead, mercury and other heavy metals.

"I am deeply disappointed by the actions of the Environmental Protection Agency. It was a preventable mistake, and they must be held accountable," Herbert said. "Our top priority will continue to be the safety of Utahns and wildlife affected. With potential long-term implications, the emergency proclamation will allow us to continue to support affected businesses and communities."

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper (D) likewise declared a state of emergency earlier this week, releasing \$500,000 in funding to address spill and cleanup efforts ([E&ENews PM](#), Aug. 10).

The Wall Street Journal yesterday identified Fenton, Mo.-based Environmental Restoration as the contractor working on the Gold King Mine at the time of the accident, citing an unnamed EPA official.

Reporter Phil Taylor contributed.

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